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Research Article

The Ikhwani Sect in Chinese Islam: Historical Evolution, Reformist Ideology, and Sociopolitical Adaptation

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Abstract. The Ikhwani sect represents one of the most influential reformist movements within Chinese Islam, emerging in the late nineteenth century under the leadership of Ma Wanfu (1849–1934). Inspired by Wahhabi ideas encountered during his studies in Mecca, Ma Wanfu sought to purify Chinese Islam by calling for a return to the Quran and Hadith while opposing syncretic practices such as Sufi saint veneration and Confucian-influenced rituals. This paper investigates the historical evolution, doctrinal foundations, and sociopolitical adaptation of the Ikhwani through three major phases: its ideological formation (1890s–1918), institutional consolidation under the Ma warlords (1918–1949), and pragmatic accommodation under Communist governance (post-1949). Drawing upon archival sources, mosque records, and key doctrinal texts, the study employs the theoretical frameworks of religious institutionalism and adaptive resistance to examine how the Ikhwani maintained theological integrity while surviving successive regime changes. The paper argues that the sect's quietist orientation, pedagogical investment, and ritual standardisation provided a sustainable model of religious resilience. By comparing the Ikhwani to other reformist movements in the Islamic world, this study highlights the unique pathways through which Islam adapted to the Chinese sociopolitical context.

Keywords: Chinese Islam, Islamic reform, Ma Wanfu, Ikhwani sect, religious adaptation.

INTRODUCTION

The Ikhwani movement occupies a distinctive position in the intellectual and religious landscape of modern Chinese Islam. Etymologically derived from the Arabic term 'Ikhwan', meaning 'brothers', the name reflects the Quranic injunction: "The believers are but brothers, so make peace between your brothers" (Quran 49:10)[1]. This concept of fraternity encapsulates the Ikhwani vision of Islamic unity, moral renewal, and scriptural fidelity. Founded by Ma Wanfu in Gansu during the late Qing period, the Ikhwani emerged at a time of profound upheaval. The decline of the Qing dynasty, the incursion of Western imperial powers, and internal sectarian strife among Sufi orders created a fertile environment for reformist thought.

The movement arose as part of a broader global revivalist wave that swept the Islamic world from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. In Arabia, the Wahhabi movement led by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1791) called for a return to the pure monotheism of early Islam, denouncing saint worship and innovations (bidʿa)[2]. Similarly, in India and Southeast Asia, movements such as the Mujahidin, the Padri, and the Sanusiyya sought to purify Islamic belief and practice. The Ikhwani movement, though influenced by Wahhabi thought, adapted reformist principles to the unique cultural and political circumstances of Chinese Muslim society. This study situates the Ikhwani within the theoretical framework of religious institutionalism, exploring how the movement developed apolitical strategies to survive under shifting regimes while maintaining doctrinal coherence.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a historical-analytical methodology, integrating archival, textual, and ethnographic evidence. Primary sources include mosque records, genealogical manuscripts, and early Republican-era religious publications from Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia. These are supplemented by Ma Wanfu's own writings and those of his disciples, particularly Hu Songshan and Wang Jingzhai. Secondary materials—such as the works of Dru Gladney, Jonathan Lipman, and Bai

[1] " إنما المؤمنون إخوة فاصلحوا بين أخويكم واتقوا الله"[الحجرات:10]

[2] The concept of"bidʿa"(religious innovation) served as a critical theological battleground in modern Chinese Islamic reform, particularly in the Ikhwani movement's critique of traditional practices. While Sufi orders and Qadeem traditionalists viewed certain local customs—such as tomb veneration and elaborate funeral rites—as culturally embedded expressions of piety, reformers like Ma Wanfu condemned them as unlawful innovations distorting "pure" Islam. This tension between scripturalist revival and lived tradition reflects broader global debates in Islamic modernism, yet with distinct Chinese characteristics. The Ikhwani's selective application of"bidʿa" accusations—targeting practices with Confucian/folk influences while tolerating some Hanafi juristic flexibility—reveals the movement's pragmatic balancing of reformist zeal and local realities. Contemporary Chinese Muslim communities continue to negotiate these boundaries, as state-led "Sinicization" policies simultaneously suppress "foreign" influences while co-opting Islamic traditions for national identity projects.

Shouyi—provide broader contextual insights. The analytical framework combines religious institutionalism and adaptive resistance, examining how the Ikhwani's organisational structure and ritual standardisation enabled resilience across different political orders. By focusing on the interplay between theology, education, and governance, this study seeks to contribute to the understanding of Islam's indigenisation in non-Arab contexts.

Historical Origins and Doctrinal Reforms

The emergence of the Ikhwani (Yihewani) movement in late 19th-century China was not an isolated religious phenomenon. It was the product of a complex confluence of global Islamic revivalist currents, intense local sectarian rivalries, and a specific socio-historical context of imperial decline and intellectual ferment. Its founder, Ma Wanfu, synthesized these disparate elements into a potent reformist agenda that sought to purify Chinese Islamic practice, leading to the creation of one of the most significant and enduring Islamic sects in modern China.

Wahhabi Influences and Localized Adaptation

The intellectual and spiritual wellspring of the Chinese Ikhwani sect can be traced to the broader Islamic revivalist movements of the 18th and 19th centuries, with the Wahhabi movement of the Arabian Peninsula serving as a particularly influential prototype. The conditions that gave rise to Wahhabism mirrored, in some respects, the crises facing the Muslim world elsewhere, including China.

The 18th-century Arab world existed in a state of political fragmentation and socio-cultural anxiety. Politically, it was caught between a decaying Ottoman Empire and the expanding colonial ambitions of European powers like Britain and France. Economically, foreign exploitation and control over trade routes exacerbated internal poverty and underdevelopment. Culturally, the influx of Western sciences and values through missionary activities—which often served as an ideological handmaiden to colonialism—presented both a challenge and an opportunity. More critically, from a religious perspective, the interior of the Arabian Peninsula was seen by reformers as mired in a state akin to the pre-Islamic Jahiliyya (Age of Ignorance). Practices such as the veneration of saints, pilgrimages to tombs, and the supplication of trees and stones for blessings were widespread. These syncretic and superstitious customs were viewed by purists as a grave deviation from the strict monotheism (Tawhid) of original Islam.

It was against this backdrop of external threat and internal decay that Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1791) launched his revivalist movement. Born into a scholarly family in the Najd region, his extensive studies in Islamic philosophy and Sufi theology ultimately led him to a reformist position rooted in the Hanbali school of jurisprudence. He vehemently critiqued Sufi, Shia, and popular Sunni practices he deemed heterodox, calling for a return to the foundational texts—the Quran and the Hadith—and the revival of *ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning) to purge Islam of these accretions. The Wahhabi movement was, in essence, a fundamentalist response aimed at religious and socio-political regeneration, seeking to unify the Arabian Peninsula under a purified Islamic creed.

The impact of this movement resonated far beyond Arabia. The 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed a global surge in Islamic reformism inspired by the Wahhabi example. Movements such as the Indian Mujahideen, the Padri in Indonesia, and the Jihad movements in West Africa, though diverse in their local manifestations, shared a common slogan: "returning to the scriptures and reforming customs." They uniformly criticized saint worship and superstitious practices, advocating for a direct and unmediated relationship with the divine through strict adherence to the Quran and Sunnah. Their methods of propagation—relying on scholarly preaching, the establishment of schools, and the translation and printing of religious texts—provided a blueprint for reformers elsewhere.

Ma Wanfu's formative pilgrimage and studies in Mecca during the late 19th century placed him directly in the path of this powerful reformist tide. The "Scripturalist Reform" ideology he later championed was objectively and profoundly shaped by these global currents, particularly the austere and puritanical ethos of Wahhabism. The subsequent development of the Ikhwani movement in China, with its emphasis on textual study, the publication of reformist literature, and the establishment of new educational institutions, clearly aligns it with this worldwide wave of Islamic revival. However, as will be explored, Ma Wanfu was not a mere imitator; he selectively adapted these foreign ideas to the unique contours of the Chinese Islamic landscape.

Pre-Ikhwani Sectarian Rivalries and Social Decay

To understand the rapid rise of the Ikhwani movement, one must appreciate the volatile religious and social environment of 19th-century Northwest China, particularly the violent sectarianism that plagued its Muslim communities. The region was a mosaic of competing Islamic traditions, primarily divided between the older, syncretic Qadim sect and various influential Sufi orders (menhuan).

Sufism, which had taken root in Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai from the late Ming dynasty onward, was represented by major orders like the Khufiyya, Jahriyya, Qadiriyya, and Kubrawiyya. These orders, centered around charismatic saintly figures and their hereditary lineages, provided spiritual solace and communal structure. However, they also became sources of intense conflict. As recorded in texts like the *Xunhua Zhi*, disputes between the Jahriyya and Khufiyya orders often escalated into deadly violence. Qing officials, following a classic strategy of divide and rule, frequently exploited these divisions, siding with one faction to suppress another, thereby deepening communal rifts.

A pivotal example was the conflict between the "Old Teaching" (Khufiyya) and the "New Teaching" (Jahriyya) in the late 18th century. When the Jahriyya leader Ma Mingxin began preaching his distinct doctrines, offering "intellectual vitality" and material support, he attracted a large following, threatening the dominance of the established Khufiyya order. Doctrinal debates quickly turned into accusations of heterodoxy and, eventually, armed clashes. The Qing government's brutal suppression of the Jahriyya, culminating in Ma Mingxin's execution, left a legacy of deep-seated resentment and trauma within the Muslim community.

This internal sectarian strife occurred within the broader context of a decaying late Qing society. China, reeling from foreign incursions and internal rebellions, had been reduced to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal state. For the Hui Muslims, this period was marked by severe ethnic discrimination and state-sponsored violence. The deep-seated "Hua-Yi" (civilized-barbarian) ideology among Han officials and intellectuals led to the systematic marginalization of the Hui. Prominent scholars like Gu Yanwu disparaged them as clinging to "obstinate customs," while the Qianlong Emperor himself used derogatory terms like "Huamen"[3] and "mixed breeds" in official edicts.

This institutional bias repeatedly boiled over into catastrophe. The horrific pacification of the Shaanxi-Gansu Hui Rebellions (1862-1873) resulted in the near-total destruction of Muslim society in Shaanxi. Historical records indicate that all 800 mosques in the Guanzhong Plain were razed, and the Hui population plummeted from nearly a million to a mere 60,000 survivors who were forcibly relocated to barren lands in Gansu and Ningxia. This demographic and cultural devastation forced the surviving Muslim communities to retreat inwards, fostering an insular and defensive mentality, sometimes encapsulated in the pessimistic belief that "seeking education is tantamount to apostasy."

It was into this milieu of sectarian fragmentation, social trauma, and intellectual stagnation that Ma Wanfu emerged. The Ikhwani movement's call for unity (its very name meaning "brotherhood") and a return to a purified, text-based faith offered a powerful alternative to the hereditary hierarchies of the menhuan and the syncretism of the Qadim. It appealed to lower-ranking imams and the literate laity who were disillusioned with the corrupt and violent state of religious leadership. The movement thus channeled not only a desire for spiritual purity but also a profound aspiration for social regeneration and a reintegration of a battered community into the modern world.

The Islamic Landscape on the Eve of Reform

Before Ma Wanfu's reforms, the Chinese Islamic world was dominated by two main traditions. The first was the Qadim (from Arabic Qadim, meaning "ancient"), representing the oldest form of Islam in China. Having developed over centuries in a Confucian society, the Qadim had absorbed significant local cultural influences. While this fostered coexistence, it also led to practices far removed from orthodox Islam. Elaborate funeral rites involving loud wailing and white mourning garments (a direct Confucian influence), the observance of memorial ceremonies on the 7th, 40th, and 100th days after death, and practices like praying for rain at saints' tombs or using

[3] The term "Huamen" (花门) has various meanings across different contexts. Initially, it referred to a geographical location, specifically Huamen Mountain, which was later associated with the Huihe (Uighur) people. It also served as a designation for the Huihe, especially in Tang Dynasty literature. Additionally, "Huamen" could denote the military forces or organizations of the Huihe. In some Ming Dynasty texts, it was used pejoratively to describe brothels or wealthy households. Culturally, it symbolized the customs and traditions of the Huihe. In modern Chinese, it can neutrally refer to the wife's family. The specific meaning of "Huamen" depends on the context in which it is used.

Quranic verses as protective charms became commonplace. These syncretic customs, while culturally embedded, were later prime targets for Ikhwani reformist criticism.

The second major force was Sufism (menhuan). By the late 19th century, the Northwest was a complex web of Sufi orders and their sub-branches, such as the Beizhuang, Huasi, and Jahriyya. These orders provided communal identity and spiritual guidance but were also characterized by hereditary leadership and the veneration of living saints (*shaykhs*) and their tombs. The spiritual power of the menhuan was immense, but its secular and often political nature led to the very sectarian conflicts described earlier.

By the late Qing, the scene was set for change. China was in crisis, the Muslim community was politically oppressed and internally divided, and many believers sought solace in the very saint veneration and tomb pilgrimage that reformers deemed problematic. The parallel is striking: just as the Arabian Peninsula faced external pressure and internal decay that gave rise to Wahhabism, so too did Chinese Muslim society face its own existential crisis. This created a fertile ground for a reformer like Ma Wanfu, who could articulate a vision of Islam that was both purer and more universally oriented, promising to cut through the sectarian strife and cultural compromises that had, in the reformers' eyes, weakened the community.

Ma Wanfu's Educational Background and the Foundation of Ikhwani

Ma Wanfu (1849–1934) was the pivotal figure who channeled these global and local forces into a coherent reform movement. His intellectual journey, from a traditional Chinese madrasa education to advanced studies in Mecca, equipped him with the authority and the ideology to challenge the established religious order.

From Traditional Scholar to Meccan Pilgrim:Ma Wanfu's development can be divided into three key phases:

1. Early Traditional Education (1849–1886):Born into a religious family in Gansu, Ma received a classical Islamic education within the Sino-Islamic tradition. He studied under Imam "Jia" of the Beizhuang Sufi order, mastering the core Islamic sciences of Arabic syntax (nahw), jurisprudence (fiqh), and Quranic exegesis (tafsir). By his early twenties, he was certified as an imam and began teaching at mosques in Guoyuan, Hongya, and Basuchi, where he gained a reputation for innovative pedagogical methods.
2. Advanced Studies in Mecca (1886–early 1890s): In 1886, Ma embarked on the Hajj pilgrimage and remained in Mecca for several years of advanced study. This was a transformative period. He studied under scholars influenced by the prevailing Wahhabi revivalist thought, such as Uthman Ben Sanad and Salim Al-Bishri. His focus on Hanafi jurisprudence and Hadith studies was now filtered through a reformist lens that emphasized a return to the pristine Islam of the Quran and Sunnah and a rejection of religious innovation (bid'ah). This experience provided him with both the doctrinal framework for his future reforms and the immense religious capital that came from being a “Hajji” who had studied at the heart of the Islamic world.

3. Return and Reform (1890s–1934):Armed with this new perspective, Ma Wanfu returned to China and launched his "Return to the Scripture" movement, aiming to purge Chinese Islam of the syncretic and Sufi practices he now viewed as deviations.

The Launch of Reform and Doctrinal Confrontation

Ma Wanfu began propagating his ideas almost immediately upon his return. In 1892, while passing through Laohekou, Hubei, during Ramadan, he was invited to lead prayers. He immediately clashed with local customs, such as the number of *rak'ahs* in the *Tarawih* prayer. When challenged, he cited classical texts to support his position, impressing the community with his scholarship. He stayed to teach, but his radical critique of local practices, which he saw as corrupted by Chinese customs, provoked a fierce backlash. Historical accounts describe opponents smearing his windows with feces and hurling stones at him.

Undeterred, he moved to Ankang, Shaanxi, continuing his mission with disciples Li Renshan and Ma Guangqing. There, he faced even stiffer resistance from all four local mosques, earning him the nickname "Iron Ruling" for his unwavering stance. Despite being forced to leave, his ideas had taken root.

The movement formally coalesced in 1893 when Ma Wanfu returned to Gansu. He severed ties with the Beizhuang order and, with allies like Ma Huisan, launched the "Scripturalist Movement" from the Ketuo Mosque. Collaborating with ten senior imams, he formulated a reform program encapsulated in the "Ten Principles of the Orchard," which included:

1. Strict monotheism (Tawhid) and the rejection of saint worship.
2. The supremacy of the Quran and Hadith over local customs.
3. The prohibition of religious innovation (bid'ah).
4. The simplification and standardization of worship rituals.
5. An Arabic-centric education, abolishing the use of Chinese transliterations in liturgy.
6. Rejection of Sufi excesses, particularly tomb veneration.
7. Promotion of communal unity under a purified Islam.
8. The application of “ijtihad” (independent reasoning) by qualified scholars.
9. Opposition to syncretism with Confucian or Daoist practices.
10. Political quietism, focusing on religious rather than political reform.

This manifesto placed the Ikhwani on a direct collision course with the established Sufi orders and the Qadim. Ma and his followers were branded as heretics and troublemakers. The conflict became so severe that it drew the attention of political authorities. Ma was even accused of anti-Qing activities, and his life was often in danger. He was forced to flee to Xinjiang, where his preaching again aroused opposition, this time from the Uyghur nobility and the governor, Yang Zengxin, who imprisoned him.

His fortunes changed in 1918 when he was rescued by the Qinghai warlord Ma Qi. Recognizing the political utility of aligning with a religious reform movement that challenged the power bases of rival Sufi orders, Ma Qi brought Ma Wanfu to Xining and installed him at the Dongguan Mosque. This patronage provided the Ikhwani

with a secure base and official support, allowing the movement to institutionalize and spread rapidly throughout Ma family-controlled territories in Qinghai and Gansu.

Strategic Quietism: The Key to Survival Across Regimes

A critical factor in the Ikhwani movement's long-term survival was its strategic doctrine of political quietism. Ma Wanfu understood a crucial lesson from Chinese history: while dynasties and regimes change, the bureaucratic state is a permanent force that will annihilate any perceived political threat. He had witnessed the Qing state's brutal suppression of Sufi-led revolts, which were often framed as political rebellions rather than religious dissent.

Therefore, Ma Wanfu consciously decoupled religious reform from political action. His movement focused exclusively on ritual correctness, pedagogical control, and doctrinal purification. This approach can be seen as a form of tactical adaptation, aligning with Max Weber's concept of "other-worldly asceticism," where the focus is on spiritual and ethical perfection rather than worldly political transformation. In practice, this meant:Ritual as Armor: By focusing theological debates on minutiae like finger placement during prayer or the volume of water used for ablutions, the Ikhwani presented themselves as concerned with ritual precision, not political sedition. Educational Institutionalization:They built self-sustaining networks of mosques and schools (like the Dongguan Grand Mosque system) that operated independently of, but not in opposition to, the state. And tactical Alliances: Ma Wanfu accepted the protection of warlords like Ma Qi but refused to explicitly bless their military campaigns. This was a pragmatic exchange: legitimacy for the warlord in return for autonomy for the movement.

This strategy stands in stark contrast to the fate of contemporaneous Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, whose direct entanglement with politics led to systematic state repression. The Ikhwani, by contrast, learned to navigate successive political systems. Under the Nationalists, they would preach loyalty to Chiang Kai-shek while quietly referencing Quranic verses on obedience to authority. After 1949, they proved adept at accommodating the Communist Party, with mosques displaying banners that read "Love Your Country, Love Your Religion," and Ikhwani leaders sometimes acting as intermediaries between the state and other Muslim groups.

It is important to note that while Wahhabi influence on Ma Wanfu is undeniable, his ideology was a localized adaptation. He adopted the Wahhabi zeal for purging un-Islamic customs but did not fully embrace its radical anti-madhhab stance. Ma Wanfu and the Ikhwani remained firmly within the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. They opposed the “practices” of the Sufi orders but did not reject Sufism outright in the way Wahhabis did. His reform principles were grounded in a broader range of classical Islamic sources, making Ikhwani a distinctively Chinese Islamic reformist movement, one that was conservative in theology but pragmatic in its relationship with temporal power.

The Development Phases of the Ikhwani Movement

The evolution of the Ikhwani from a small reformist circle to a major pillar of Chinese Islam can be divided into three distinct phases, each defined by its relationship with political power and its strategies for growth.

Phase 1: Grassroots Reform and Doctrinal Struggle (1892–1918)

This initial phase was characterized by bottom-up preaching and intense confrontation with the religious establishment. Upon his return from Mecca, Ma Wanfu's early campaigns, in Laohekou and Ankang, focused on "ritual correction" as a non-confrontational entry point for reform. The formal launch in Gansu in 1893 under the banner of "scriptural adherence and custom reform" was a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the Sufi *menhuan* and the syncretic Qadim.

The movement's choice of the name "Ikhwani" (Brotherhood) was itself a critique of the hereditary and hierarchical nature of the *menhuan*, emphasizing instead a fraternal unity of believers based on a common commitment to scriptural truth. Ma Wanfu's immense scholarly reputation was key to attracting followers; his lectures on theology and jurisprudence, delivered with unparalleled clarity, drew students from across the country.

However, this period was marked by fierce persecution. The entrenched religious orders, feeling their authority threatened, accused Ma of heresy and sedition, lobbying Qing and later warlord authorities to suppress him. He faced personal attacks, was forced to flee multiple times, and was nearly executed. Despite this, his moral authority and unwavering resolve, as noted by contemporaries like the jurist Wang Jingzhai, gradually won over a critical mass of supporters, laying a firm foundation for the movement.

Phase 2: Warlord Patronage and Institutionalization (1918–1949)

Ma Wanfu's rescue by Ma Qi in 1918 marked a decisive turning point. Under the patronage of the Ma family warlords in Qinghai (Ma Qi, Ma Lin, Ma Bufang) and Ningxia (Ma Fuxiang, Ma Hongkui), the Ikhwani movement gained the political protection and resources needed for rapid expansion.

This patronage, however, was a double-edged sword. While it allowed for the construction of mosques and schools on an unprecedented scale—most notably the seminary at Xining's Dongguan Mosque—it also associated the movement with the sometimes-brutal rule of the Ma clique. Ma Wanfu himself was ambivalent, cautioning that "True reform must grow from the hearts of believers, not the barrels of guns." Nevertheless, the institutionalization proceeded apace. A standardized curriculum was developed, and a generation of scholars, known as the "New Ten Great Imams," was trained to systematize and spread Ikhwani doctrine.

During this phase, the movement developed distinct regional characteristics. In Qinghai, it was closely tied to state power; in Ningxia, it took on a more scholarly character under figures like Hu Songshan; and in eastern cities like Tianjin and Shanghai, it blended with modernist Islamic thought through intellectuals like Wang Jingzhai. By the time of Ma Wanfu's death in 1934, the Ikhwani had become a major force in Chinese Islam. Its ability to survive the collapse of its Ma family patrons in

1949 testified that its roots extended deeper than mere political convenience; it had successfully addressed the spiritual and communal needs of a population navigating modernity.

Phase 3: Adaptation and Accommodation under Communism (Post-1949)

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 presented a new challenge for all religious groups. The Ikhwani movement, with its history of political quietism and institutional structure, was uniquely positioned to adapt. Its leadership, now in the hands of Ma Wanfu's intellectual descendants, made a strategic decision to accommodate the new regime.

Key figures from the previous era, such as the prolific translator Wang Jingzhai, the educator Pang Shiqian, and the southern reformers like Bai Liangcheng in Yunnan and Li Renshan in Hunan, had already steered the movement toward a focus on modern education and community development. This aligned, at least superficially, with the CCP's goals for social progress.

The Ikhwani's doctrinal rigidity, which had once set it against the Sufi orders, now became an asset. The state viewed the mystical and potentially messianic tendencies of menhuan with greater suspicion than the more legalistic and predictable Ikhwani. Ikhwani mosques often became conduits for state policy, displaying slogans like "Love Your Country, Love Your Religion" and their leaders sometimes assisting in the monitoring of more independent-minded groups. This state-mosque symbiosis, while controversial to some, ensured the Ikhwani's survival and continued influence.

Throughout the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st, the Ikhwani movement has maintained its position as one of the primary expressions of Islam in China. Its journey from a radical reformist sect to a mainstream, state-tolerated religious institution is a testament to the pragmatic core of Ma Wanfu's vision: an unwavering commitment to a purified Islamic faith coupled with a flexible strategy for ensuring its preservation within the constraints of the Chinese state.

CONCLUSION

The Ikhwani movement stands as a seminal force in the modern history of Chinese Islam, a sophisticated reformist project that emerged from the confluence of global religious revivalism and profound local socio-political crisis. Founded by the visionary scholar Ma Wanfu in the late 19th century, the movement articulated a powerful response to the internal decay and external pressures facing Muslim communities in China. Its core mission—to purge Islamic practice of syncretic traditions and return to a perceived scriptural orthodoxy—was not merely a theological exercise but a profound endeavor at communal redefinition and spiritual reinvigoration.

The movement's intellectual genesis was undeniably global, with the Wahhabi revival in Arabia providing a crucial template for its puritanical zeal and reformist methodology. Ma Wanfu's studies in Mecca exposed him to a transnational current of Islamic thought that prioritized the Quran and Sunnah over later accretions. However, the Ikhwani's true significance lies in its masterful process of localization.

It was not a mere transplantation of Wahhabism but a selective adaptation tailored to the Chinese context. The movement directed its critique inward, targeting the specific syncretic practices of the Qadim tradition—such as elaborate Confucian-style funeral rites—and the hierarchical, hereditary structures of the Sufi orders that had, in the reformers' view, fostered sectarian violence and doctrinal impurity. By doing so, it offered a unifying identity based on a "pure" Islam that could transcend localist factionalism.

A cornerstone of the Ikhwani's enduring resilience was its strategic doctrine of political quietism. In a stark contrast to movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, which sought to transform the state, the Ikhwani under Ma Wanfu pursued a path of tactical accommodation. This philosophy of separating religious purification from political engagement was a calculated survival strategy, born from the historical memory of the Qing state's brutal suppression of politically-engaged Sufi revolts. By focusing on ritual precision, educational reform, and institutional building, the movement presented itself as a non-threatening entity to successive regimes. This pragmatism allowed it to navigate the treacherous transition from Qing rule to warlord patronage and, ultimately, to a *modus vivendi* with the Communist state, demonstrating an institutional flexibility that ensured its survival where more politically ambitious movements might have faltered.

The movement's legacy was secured through intellectual institutionalization. Second-generation leaders like Hu Songshan and Wang Jingzhai expanded Ma Wanfu’s vision, blending rigorous traditional scholarship with modern pedagogical methods. They established school networks, translated seminal texts, and engaged with the broader Islamic world, thereby ensuring the Ikhwani’s transition from a contentious reformist sect in the Northwest to a mainstream, nationally recognized pillar of Islamic modernity in China. Its emphasis on literacy, textual study, and a cosmopolitan Islamic identity resonated deeply with urban merchants and intellectuals, forging a community capable of navigating the challenges of the 20th century.

In conclusion, the historical trajectory of the Ikhwani sect offers a compelling case study in the dynamics of religious reform. It masterfully navigated the perennial tensions between tradition and modernity, global inspiration and local implementation, and spiritual idealism and political pragmatism. Its story underscores that the longevity of a religious movement often depends less on doctrinal purity alone and more on its ability to institutionalize its teachings and adapt to the immutable realities of state power. For Chinese Muslims, the Ikhwani provided a pathway to preserve and modernize their faith amidst a century of tumultuous change. Future research into its contemporary manifestations, its evolving relationship with the Chinese state in the 21st century, and its dialogue with global Salafist currents will undoubtedly yield further critical insights into the ongoing negotiation of Muslim identity in China.

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